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 THE NATION
 8 July 1968

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United Fruit Country

THE GUATEMALA TRAVELER: A Concise History and Guide. By Selden Rodman. Meredith Press. 127 pp. \$5.95.

WARREN SLOAT

Mr. Sloat, a newspaper man who has published in *Liberation*, *Ramparts*, the *Saturday Review* and other publications, is gathering material for a book on Guatemala.

Next year Guatemala will celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of its deliverance from what Secretary of State John Foster Dulles liked to call "the yoke of communism." If there is any celebration it will be arranged where most of Guatemala's affairs are arranged, in the United States.

When the Central Intelligence Agency, the United Fruit Co., and Guatemalan rightists teamed up to overthrow the progressive regime of President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán in 1954, it was hailed in the United States as the first cold-war victory. Lobbyists talked it up for inject the little Central American nation with economic miracle juice. What more appropriate showcase for the cornucopia of good relations with the United States than the country that "came back from communism"!

Yet despite considerable aid, including string pulling at the World Bank, Guatemala "has known little but stagnant dictatorship and corruption since 1954," as Dan Kurzman wrote in *The Washington Post* in 1966. Two Maryknoll priests, expelled for aiding leftist guerrillas, have called it the next Vietnam. It has become trapped in what the Guatemalan revolution, which ended with Arbenz's overthrow, sought to eliminate: political repression, illiteracy and landlessness, economic imperialism.

One would never know it, however, from reading the latest work of Selden Rodman, former nemesis of nonrepresentational art and now an author of nonrepresentational history. His factual errors (such as making a colonel of Jorge Toriello, a civilian leader of the 1944 revolution) are evidences of his haste in turning out his series on Latin America. But more important is his blend of liberal cant about the need for reform and his attack on any authentic reform in a book suffused with the anti-Communist mentality.

From the election of Juan José Arevalo in 1945 until 1951, Guatemala underwent a little New Deal. A new constitution guaranteed civil liberties unprecedented in most of Latin America; a labor

code was established and the formation of unions allowed; social security was begun; Arevalo, an educator, threw himself into a flurry of school building and literacy programs. While paying the obligatory respects to these innovations, Rodman comes up with three points with which to quibble: Arevalo grew critical of the good old U.S.A., allowed Arbenz to become President, and acquiesced in the murder of armed forces chief, Francisco Arana.

In making his case, Rodman ignores the temper of U.S.-Guatemala relations through the period—exemplified by U.S. Ambassador Richard Patterson's chronic plotting to overthrow Arevalo—since to deal with it runs the risk that Arevalo's growing anti-Americanism might make sense. To examine the alternatives to Arbenz, likewise, might be unnerving. To link the killing of Arana to a cluster of plots against the regime might damage the argument.

Rodman accepts the tradition that links the Arbenz regime, through a careful selection of facts, to communism. There were no Communists in Arbenz's cabinet, as even the most rabid anti-Communist writers have admitted, nor was there anything remotely resembling communism in his program. Though political freedoms continued and though the government concentrated on a restrained but effective agrarian reform program to expropriate idle land on large estates, Rodman calls it a "Dictatorship of the Left."

Meanwhile, according to Rodman's scenario, United Fruit officials traveled in sackcloth and ashes. "United Fruit's 'image' could not be lived down by penitence and good works," he writes, "not even by giving its employees unprecedented social benefits" (which the "now all-powerful unions" apparently had not thought to demand) nor "by giving up its stock ownership in the International Railways of Central America to bury the charge that it was a stockholder and preferred customer at the same time."

Rodman has a habit of reducing plain facts to "charges." That the railway was in effect a subsidiary of the fruit company is pivotal to an understanding of one of Guatemala's central problems: interlocking foreign control of basic transportation and communication.

Though the author spares no pains in detailing the company's selfless devotion to the people of Guatemala, Guatemalans enigmatically continue to hurl rocks through the United Fruit Co. windows. Can we attribute this to ingratitude? Not totally. Though Rodman refuses to allow that the Guatemalans may have a legitimate grievance, he explains it by "psychological" factors—the fruit company executives live in larger homes, etc.

In the neatest trick of the book, Rod-